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ABSTRACT

A project targeted teachers in the Top End of Australia's Northern Territory, who faced unique difficulties in their literacy and numeracy practice. Cross-cultural training and education were affected by isolation and geographic distance, often an absence of professional support and development, and limited access to resources. The project offered teachers the opportunity to reflect on and write about their practice, with major focus on comprehension and analysis of issues arising in modifying curriculum to match the culturally and geographically diverse background of education and training in the Top End. Data were collected from participants by journal reflections, including critical incident collection. These themes emerged from reports from five sites: training in literacy and numeracy with indigenous students was far more productive if cultural relevance was considered in delivery (e.g., choosing subject matter from the Aboriginal cultural domain); extant adult knowledge should be recognized (e.g., a student may speak three or four Aboriginal languages and carries all the concomitant cultural knowledge); teachers need to have regard for cultural issues and different learning styles; different approaches were needed for remote area students and those from families dealing with stolen generation issues; acting as a facilitator, rather than direct teaching encouraged independent learning that led to increased self-esteem; and the need for flexibility could not be underestimated. (15 references) (YLB)

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Mentoring Research for Adult Literacy and Numeracy Practitioners in the Top End of the Northern Territory

Kate Boyd

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Top End Northern Territory ALNARC Project 2001

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Bell, J. (1993) *Doing Your Research Project. A Guide for First Time Researchers in Education and Social Sciences (pp103-8)*

Knobel, M. & C. Lankshear (1999) *Ways of Knowing Researching Literacy (pp 84-103)*

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1. Aims

Both Central Australia and the Top End of the Northern Territory pose unique difficulties for teachers and their literacy and numeracy practice. Cross-cultural training and education are affected by isolation and geographic distance, often an absence of professional support and development along with limited access to resources that practitioners in southern metropolitan and regional areas take for granted. In remote communities employment is often not available for Indigenous people. Frequently, literacy and numeracy teachers are not teaching English as a second language but as a third or fourth language.

The goal of this project was to offer teachers in these situations the opportunity to reflect on and write about their practice, thus contributing to the development of a research culture among adult literacy and numeracy practitioners in the NT. The major focus was on comprehension and analysis of the issues which arise in modifying curriculum to match the culturally and geographically diverse background of education and training in the Top End. This resulted in case descriptions of teaching practice.

2. Methodology

A Steering Group made up of four adult LLN practitioners met in the first half of February. This resulted in the beginning of discussions with teachers in stakeholder organisations. Training delivery of literacy and numeracy to Indigenous adult students was chosen as the focus for the research activities. Data collection from the participants ('novice researchers') was by journal reflections including critical incident collection. A workshop program was originally planned for March to support the data collection and documentation by novice researchers. The workshop did not happen because of considerable delays in getting the project through the university contracts procedures. It became apparent that if we followed the work-shopping in Darwin path that the project would have to be dropped as the financial/logistical difficulties were too great

Once potential stake-holder organisations were contacted six participants showed interest and enthusiasm, as well as a small group from an educational institution. All these practitioners work with Indigenous students. A letter was sent to all participants with photocopied materials describing diary writing and practitioner reflection and a booklet describing critical incident methodology. The package consisted of a chapter called 'Field research in literacy classrooms' from *Ways of Knowing: researching literacy* by M.

Knobel and C. Lankshear (1999) with emphasis on observation and journalistic techniques and a chapter 'Diaries' from *Doing Your Research Project* (J. Bell, 1993). The booklet was *Critical Incidents in Vocational Teaching* by M. F. Christie and R. M. Young (1995). The consent forms and plain English statements were also included. The participation of 'novice researchers' was monitored by email and telephone by the research officer. The final activity for the researcher was the collation of data, analysis of data and development of the report of 'case studies' from each site.

The research officer and novice researchers worked within the parameters of the University's ethics procedures, that is, informed consent, plain English statement and confidentiality. Participants were given an undertaking of anonymity in the final report. The data gathered will be placed in a safe repository at the Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies with access through the Dean. Because of the research component this project's contract has been redirected through the Higher Education and Research Branch of the NTU instead of the usual External Funding sector (Pro-Vice-Chancellor [TAFE and International Branch]). The research component of the project required approval from the Human Ethics Committee.

Data collection by the participants was carried out by the use of daily or work-shop specific reflections on training delivery and by collection of critical incidents. Critical incidents are 'usually singular, significant, memorable, personable' events and are 'the source of some sort of retrospective judgement or reflection' (Christie and Young, 1995, P. 4). Some of the participants were slow to 'get off the ground' because of other commitments. For example, one adult educator was involved in organising the annual arts festival and another teacher had to delay his workshop because of a funeral.

3. Findings and Themes

Site 1

Two reports came from one remote Aboriginal community. One dealt with the local land-owning group and focussed on adult literacy in the vernacular in the two-way learning program at the school while the other reported on workshops for a group of outstation assistant teachers. The teacher-linguist who wrote the vernacular literacy report presented the entire project, a mapping exercise for the local landowners, as one important critical incident in the community's experience of adult education (assistant teachers, parents and relatives of children in the two-way program and elders who oversaw the program). She presents five main themes. The first is consultation about the choice of a topic which follows on into the provision of a cooperative, collaborative learning environment combined with the workshop being presented by an expert linguist. The importance of the community project is vindicated by the final production of a public document. These 3-4 week workshops held in this community always choose a topic from the Aboriginal cultural domain which is powerful and important for the Aboriginal people to explore themselves, for example, a hunting trip, a dance ceremony and for this project, developing a map of local land. The teacher-linguist points out that it is important to pay senior traditional owners working on the project to emphasise the 'seriousness of the work'. There had to be regard for cultural issues such as 'several people were very knowledgable about their own particular area but could not or would not speak for areas nearby', showing elders respect and making sure no-one lost face over mistakes. The teacher-linguist and expert linguist had 'very little formal design or lesson planning' beyond concentrating on the local language, reading and writing and local cultural knowledge 'and acted as facilitators, not teachers'. The writer notes the pride shown in the final production of the map and notes which will be published as a book. The map will also form part of the school curriculum for the language unit and assist teachers in developing specific learning outcomes as part of the language maintenance program.

The teacher-linguist presented three main reflections. The first was 'how little we whitefellas understand' especially in relation to the complexity of information held by local Aboriginal landowners (this is also commented on by the Homelands teacher).Next she commented on the political nature of Aboriginal learning , 'that adult learners have a political voice and that it can be used to empower them'. Finally the importance of seeing research happening was emphasised. She is now trying to determine how to follow-up the success of this major 'critical incident' in adult education at this community.

Site 2

The Homelands school teacher who was mentoring the assistant teachers also commented that he 'had totally underestimated the students' existing knowledge base and found that conceptually the students had given the subject matter plenty of thought in their own lives'. The theme of his workshop was money and the economy although he also outlines a previous workshop involving the collation and collection of data on wildlife usage among Homeland residents by community rangers. The aim was to produce a data program to be delivered by assistant teachers in the Homelands. Again this was carried out using Aboriginal cultural domain indicators as well as using a western recording table. The money and economy workshop (with an emphasis on welfare) was run at a Homeland Centre on the banks of a river. Workshops are rotated around the different Homeland Centres for the assistant teachers (there are fourteen with 211 students). The Homelands teacher worked from traditional economies through to the modern Australian wide system and this resulted in developing a basic economics course for secondary students.

The Homelands teacher reflected that he found this workshop 'the most difficult one I have ever planned or delivered' and felt like abandoning it. But instead he found that 'adults bring to their learning well developed notions of the world around them and that pre-existing knowledge is the golden starting point'. He points out that these assistant teachers vary in their English literacy skills, but 'they are the keepers of knowledge in the program'. It is stressed that he must continually maintain a balance between the need to attain set outcomes and the 'individual and cultural demands placed on the student in any given day'. A good point that applies to several of the reports is that "the pedagogy --- must be inclusive of 'both ways' world views".

Site 3

The adult educator from another remote community outlined how she had used some strategies and teaching tools from an early literacy/primary and special needs program. She attempts to embed literacy and numeracy skills into several courses she teaches, with her major challenges in cultural factors and English as a Second Language (as with most of the participants.) Teaching Indigenous students the basics of word processing is often very successful at increasing self-esteem in literacy and numeracy learning. This was mentioned by several participants. This adult educator pointed out that the adult educator is involved in a lifelong learning experience in teaching literacy and numeracy, that any idea or strategy or approach to bring literacy and numeracy into any course is worth a try, especially Early Childhood literacy learning.

Site 4

A one week numeracy workshop was held at this site. One of the main themes which emerged from this report (journal writing combined with critical incident recording) was attendance as an issue especially at the end of the workshop. The two lecturers and tutor resolved this by asking forty (40) students to 'take responsibility for their own attendance by drawing up an attendance grid for each group' and this was used when problems arose

later. Attendance was not an issue in the above two reports but is at one of the other sites. In reporting back to the group students were allowed to just say 'Good Morning' if they had not completed the task at hand. This was used as a way of acknowledging 'their presence to the group'. Extra time had to be given for set work not completed. Some conventional teaching methods did not work, for example, using overhead projectors, handouts and 'Lecturer talk' so the teachers reverted to other methods such as using butcher paper for the students to write about the topic in their own words, followed by displaying it. The response to this sort of flexibility 'was terrific'. A critical incident occurred when a brainstorming activity was introduced and the students said and wrote up 'We don't understand what we are doing' at which point the lecturer acknowledged their contribution. One student claimed 'You don't like my idea'. The lecturer kept having to stress that the task was open-ended, an approach which the students seemed to find hard to accept. This was counteracted by following with a task specific activity and collaborative activities. There was plenty of flexibility in this class!

In following activities students did some work on how they would teach particular exercises in their classes. 'What we noticed was that all students put the original problem into a richer context and would use real life concrete materials'. Finally an innovative approach was used in having a blind Aboriginal person 'talk about teaching children with special needs and some of his childhood experiences at school.----------the students were enthralled'. This session worked to consolidate some of the previous work and also to relax the lecturer about some of the incidents. It was also 'a panacea for students who were becoming restless/anxious after nearly two weeks away from home'. This is an important point as this institutional site brings in students from remote communities as one of their main teaching methods. Finally the lecturer commented on students becoming more independent with their work by the end of the workshop.

Site 5

Three reports came in from this site where the English literacy and numeracy tutoring is associated with an arts and crafts centre. The need for flexibility was stressed by the tutors. One tutor reflected on the feelings expressed to her by some of the older Indigenous female students, for example, 'I am a grandmother, I should be teaching you……..instead you are teaching me', expressions of shame at having to have help with literacy and numeracy and some despondency. Several of the critical incidents refer to how these problems were overcome. The tutor responded with reasons as to why access to English literacy had been limited for these women, discussed the value of their Indigenous languages knowledge and discussed autobiographies. This constituted a critical incident to the tutor. Production of a simple book followed on from students' life-stories with lots of use of oral language in the process. Varying levels of literacy skills were a problem but independent work was always encouraged. The tutor pointed to difficulties in combining literacy and numeracy tasks for the students. Some critical incidents arose when more advanced students tried to help other struggling students when their work was not correct, especially when younger students tried to help older students. The tutor therefore had to have different goals for each student in each session to ensure adequate support and sense of challenge. Another problem faced by tutors is the lack of suitable adult literacy material. This is a problem shared by most adult educators who

work with Indigenous students. Again attendance and arrival on time for classes were problems. The tutor reflected that she found it difficult to cope with her anxiety about students not reaching dead-lines but added that she realised it was not appropriate as the students had to be responsible for their own time management. Some students only liked small groups or one on one sessions. Working out preferred learning styles was an ongoing theme in the reports. Use of humour was also an ongoing theme.

One tutor commented that sometimes a particular behaviour can be a cover-up for certain feelings e.g. scorn about set work, for 'laziness, lack of knowledge or fear of failure'. Another critical incident occurred when a student said she 'hated tutoring, doing the work made her feel like a child at school, she had been told that tutoring was an option only' and how the tutor patiently dealt with this. She outlined her feelings about student's choices to have tutoring. Is it any of her business? Should she use' "nice" methods like 'establishing goodwill and relationship'? The tutor's relationship with this particular student seemed to be an ongoing 'critical incident' with interference of working periods by discontent. The student worked better with peers 'because she doesn't see a power imbalance in it'. An important reflection made by this tutor was that 'how far you should go in doing work that isn't really tutoring but is necessary at the time', that is , issues which are blocks to learning. The time taken to establish the essential good relationship seems to take from the actual tutoring time.

The co-ordinator of this literacy and numeracy program pointed to the major difference in initial attitude of people who have chosen to do a course themselves and those who sign up for the course out of a Centrelink requirement. However these students often develop 'more positive internal motivation' as the year proceeds. She indicates that tutors report rich rewards from relationships built up with their students, for example, in watching some students take off to become voracious readers and in tutors developing a deeper understanding of indigenous culture while the student has gained considerable skills. 'Other students have learned to trust their tutors enough to reveal the real extent of their learning difficulties -------- but this must be done discreetly, so that the students are not shamed in front of other class members'. The co-ordinator describes one student, an elder in his clan, for whom 'the real meanings in communication are spoken, sung, painted and heard' and his tutor has found that he prefers to delegate reading and writing to family members but 'makes grudging concessions to writing and reading for the Balanda (white person)'.

4. Recommendations

1. Many LLN adult educators in the Northern Territory work in isolated communities and operate in professional isolation. Funding being made available to bring some of these practitioners together in Darwin would assist in ameliorating problems, which arise from this situation. Funding for any relevant conferences or workshops, which offer exposure to research and the gaining of research skills is a major requirement.

2. Suggestions for any further LLN projects in the NT need to be aware of the time needed to 'get the project up and running', especially the administrative requirements.

5. Conclusion

Several themes emerged from the reports. Training in literacy and numeracy with Indigenous students is far more productive if cultural relevance is considered in delivery, for example, as in the first two reports in which subject matter was chosen from the Aboriginal cultural domain. This tied in strongly with recognition of extant adult knowledge, for example, a student may speak three or four Aboriginal languages and therefore carries all the cultural knowledge that goes with this. Teachers need to have regard for cultural issues as well as different learning styles. One practitioner pointed out that different approaches are needed for 'remote area' students and students coming from families who are dealing with 'stolen generation' issues. Acting as a facilitator rather than direct teaching encourages independent learning which participants observed led to increased self esteem. At the same time some students need some one to one tutoring to initiate confidence albeit for a short time period. The need for flexibility in the classroom (whether in a room or on the bank of a river) cannot be underestimated. Often some 'juggling' is needed to be both flexible and meet the necessary outcomes for a course.

4. Dissemination

Copies of the final report will be sent to the participants and their communities or institutions. The project results will be disseminated by the Northern Territory Council for Adult Literacy (NTCAL), including through the attendance of some NTCAL members at the Adult Learning Australia Conference 'Place and the Ecology of Learning' at Jabiru in September.

5. Future Research

It is clear that teachers need a voice as they are often silenced politically. Additional factors apply to the needs of teachers in remote areas of Australia such as the teachers in this study who work in remote Indigenous communities. Professional development as offered by this project helps overcome the sense of working in isolation, although some of the participants could not put the effort they would have liked to have contributed to the project as they were so busy with the demands of their teaching positions and community responsibilities. The response of the participants made it apparent that teachers and tutors were at different stages of research awareness. Most responded to the request (and material sent) to write diaries but not all offered extensive reflections on their practice. Some participants did not respond to the request to use critical incident methodology. Further research training is clearly a priority.

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